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ABSTRACT

To deliver training and continuing education for education personnel in a large rural state, Montana has decentralized its Comprehensive System of Personnel Development (CSPD) by forming five regional councils. The Montana Center on Disabilities developed a statewide training program for using paraeducators as liaisons to communities to enhance educational activities. The program was delivered through the CSPD regions. At the end of the third year of the paraeducator development project, a focus group was conducted with 15 regional and state CSPD personnel to evaluate the use of the regional CSPD model during the project. Findings indicate that the goal of developing and delivering a curriculum on using paraeducators as liaisons to the community to enhance educational activities was achieved. Strengths of using regional CSPD councils were that the councils had procedures and resources in place that enabled quick program start-up. The project provided initial funding, but as the training became part of the regional councils' planning process, they developed other resources to support the training, and the project became part of the ongoing needs assessment process. Inclusion of the training in the regional process promoted the importance of the issues and involved the full network in planning beyond the scope of the original project, which helped with sustainability. Having services to offer on an ongoing basis helped build bonds between the project and the regional team. Weaknesses of the regional training model and lessons learned are discussed. (TD)

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1

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UTILIZING PARAEDUCATORS AS LINKS TO THEIR COMMUNITIES – A TRAINING PACKAGE FOR USE WITH TEACHER/PARAEDUCATOR TEAMS AND IN THE PRE-SERVICE TRAINING OF TEACHERS.

Introduction

Since the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (Public Law 94-142, 1975) each state must develop a Comprehensive System of Personnel Development to ensure that all education personnel are adequately prepared and receive appropriate continuing education. To develop a means of delivering a comprehensive system of training in a large rural state like Montana is difficult. Montana's 2001 population estimate was 904,433 (44th in population), although the state ranks 4th in size. Even Montana's largest city is less than 100,000 in population. Helge (1983) reports problems of rural environments include lack of educational resources and conflicts between school expectations and local norms. To address these problems, Montana has chosen to decentralize the CSPD process through the formation of five regional councils (Fishbaugh, Christensen, & Bailey, 1995).

The regional councils address professional isolation in several ways:

- Promotion of networking to enhance professional growth,
- Outreach from council members to regional educational professionals to help with meeting council goals and objectives,
- Collaboration of resources in the planning and initiation of staff development activities, and
- Connecting with other regions through State CSPD Council meetings to share information and support across regions (Fishbaugh, Christensen, Rude & Bailey-Anderson, 1998).

The Regional Councils have to meet specific responsibilities to receive financial support through the State Council. They must conduct needs assessments of general and special educators, develop a strategic plan to address training needs in their region, they must meet locally at least three times a year, and send representatives to the State Council meetings three times a year. Through these activities the Councils develop and carryout a plan to meet the region's training needs (Fishbaugh, et al, 1995).

The regional process for planning has proven successful. One area of success has been the implementation of state wide training initiatives in the local regions. Although this may seem counter to regional planning and development, the reality is that such initiatives are an important part of the process. The initiatives occur when regions find they have common needs and strategies to meet the needs are developed by the regional representatives

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at the State CSPD Council meetings. Therefore, the statewide initiatives show regional planning, and not "top-down" state mandates. Examples of successful statewide initiatives coordinated through the regions include:

- Special Education Endorsement Project – providing training to rural teachers to be endorsed in special education,
- Montana Training for Inclusive Education Project – providing training on inclusion practices, and
- Montana Behavior Initiative – providing training to school teams to address the needs of students with emotional and behavior disabilities (Fishbaugh, et al., 1998).

Another statewide initiative that developed from an identified need across the regions involved working with paraeducators – roles and responsibilities, training, and supervision (Fishbaugh, et al., 1998). Through coordination with the State CSPD Council and regional CSPD representatives, the Montana Center on Disabilities developed a proposal to address paraeducators' issues and in July, 1999 the Department of Education awarded the Montana Center a project (Grant #325N99046) to implement and evaluate the Paraeducator Development Project. The project used the CSPD Regions to develop and deliver a training program for using paraeducators as liaisons to the community to enhance educational activities. Part of the project was to assess the usefulness the regional CSPD approach in implementing the statewide initiative for paraeducator training.

With regard to outcomes, the regional approach was successful. The primary goal of the project was to develop a curriculum based on using paraeducators as liaisons to the community to enhance educational activities. This goal was accomplished and the opportunity to meet with large groups of paraeducators from various parts of Montana was especially helpful in gathering information related to the liaison role. The information gathered through the regions was presented in *Utilizing Paraeducators As Liaisons To The Local Community(* Hermanson & Hoagland, 2002). This information has been incorporated into a multimedia training program that is available through the Montana Center on Disabilities.

Besides outcomes, there was interest in reviewing the regional approach to training with regard benefits of the approach, difficulties of the approach, and lessons learned from the paraeducator initiative. The results of such an evaluation would help others in understanding the strengths and weaknesses of the regional CSPD model for delivering training in a rural state.

Method

Procedures

At the end of the third year of the Paraeducator Development Project, a focus group was conducted with regional and state CSPD personnel to evaluate the use of the regional CSPD model during the Project. The Project Administrator was the primary facilitator of the focus group and the two Project Directors and Project Coordinator helped with facilitation and recording of group comments. The focus group was two hours in length. The group comments were recorded on flip chart and the recordings were verified by group participants throughout the process.

Following the completion of the focus group, the information from the recording sheets was input into electronic format. The Project Directors sorted responses for duplicates and similar responses. Then the Administrator, Directors, and Coordinator independently reviewed the responses for themes. After the independent analysis, the group met and found consensus on themes and identified examples to describe each theme.

Participants

The focus group consisted of fifteen participants, in addition to the four facilitators. Participants included the regional chairperson and/or coordinator of all five Regions, the State CSPD director, and members of the state Paraprofessional Consortium. Regional chairpersons were charged with the administration duties of the Regional Councils. This included monitoring the budget, facilitating meetings, monitoring the activities of the coordinator, and attending State CSPD Council meetings. The regional coordinators carried out the plans of the Regional Councils including coordinating all training activities.

Findings

The following were the themes identified. Following each theme, are examples are from the focus group or Project staff discussion.

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Strengths

1. By using the regional model, there were procedures and resources in place that the new training could utilize, providing for quick startup.
    - Experienced regional personnel were available to develop training announcements, set up training facilities, and other activities. During the first two years of the project, these activities were done on a volunteer basis by regional council members. In the last year, each regional council was provided with funds to hire a coordinator to carry out the activities listed.
    - The training has access to a wider audience by being incorporated into regional trainings with many sessions to choose from. The broader selection of presentations attracts a wider audience.
    - The regions have individualized their procedures to fit their area. This is done by recognizing what training schedules work best in their area, what local trainers are available for train the trainer models, and what facilities work best for various types of training. A new project gains access to information immediately by becoming part of the regional process.

2. By providing initial funding to support the new initiative, the regions were willing to incorporate a new objective to their scope of work. However, as the training becomes part of the region's planning process, they develop other resources to support the training.
    - The project provided $5,000 a year to each region for offering paraeducator training if the region agreed to guidelines set by the project.
    - By the end of the three years, each region had incorporated further paraeducator training into their plans for CSPD funds.
    - Some regions had found other sources of funding for paraeducator training such as district training funds.

3. By having the initiative become part of the regional plan, it allows your program to be part of an ongoing required needs assessment process.
    - State wide data is available on the training needs related to your initiative, which helps get financial support for training.
    - The regional assessment provides information on specific local needs.
    - The process can be used to include questions that address concerns related to the training initiative.

4. Inclusion of the training in the local regional process promoted the importance of the issues and the implementation of system change in areas beyond training.
    - The Councils began using the term paraeducator rather than teacher aide.
    - The Councils became involved in trying to recognize the work of paraeducators.
    - The Councils began to include paraeducators as trainers.
    - The Councils became motivated to recruit paraeducators to the CSPD trainings and participate not just in the paraeducator training sessions, but other sessions offered as well.
    - The Councils began to consider training teachers and administrators about their roles when working with paraeducators.
    - The Council became aware of the importance of providing stipends to paraeducators to help them attend training and this practice continues.
    - The Council recognized that it was important for paraeducators to have an opportunity to meet with paraeducators from others schools for networking purposes.

5. The inclusion into the regional process brought the full network to the table for future planning related to the paraeducator initiative, which lead to planning beyond the scope of the original project that helped with sustainability.
    - Because personnel are in place to carry out training coordination activities, sustainability is more likely and there is not a need for project staff to carry out these tasks. In order to continue the training, all that is needed are trainers and keeping the content of training materials up to date.
    - Local trainers are in place after completion of the project if a train-the-trainer approach is used. Trained trainers are more likely to continue training because they do not have responsibility for the logistics of the training, therefore their primary responsible is training.
    - Community Colleges became interested in paraeducator training through interaction with the regional councils and began to develop paraeducator training programs.

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- Besides, the Community College programs, the Universities began to look at career ladder development programs for paraeducators.

6. Having services to offer on an ongoing basis helps build bonds between the project and the regional team.
   1. Because the project was willing to continue a paraeducator newsletter and maintenance of a paraeducator web site there remained a connection to continue to work together on paraeducator issues.

Weaknesses (not all weaknesses came from Focus Groups, the information was primarily garnered from Paraeducator Development staff interacting with the process over several years.

- There is difficulty taking on new initiatives if there is no seed money to start with.
- It can take time for a region to identify, recruit, and engage an adequate pool of stakeholders to establish a vibrant Regional Council. Commitment from state personnel to the concept needed to persevere during the formative stages of regional development.
- Local school administrators are still not as active as would be desirable in Regional Councils.

Lessons Learned

1. There is a need for distinct levels of responsibility between state and regions.
   - State Roles – Coordinate statewide activities that support initiative across the state and support activities of all regions
     - Provided guidance on curriculum related to paraeducator development
     - Produced *A Resource Guide for Administrators, Educators, and Paraprofessionals*
     - Coordinated statewide activities honoring paraeducators
       - Paraeducator of the Year awards and paraeducator teacher teams of the year.
       - Governor's proclamation supporting paraeducators
   - Regional Roles
     - Determined specific regional needs
     - Coordinated trainings in the region
     - Identified regional resources

2. Foundation for those wishing to adapt the model
   - The Regional Councils need time to build their network
   - There needs to be ample time at Regional and State meetings and trainings for informal networking to build linkages in the Region and State.
   - State and regional responsibilities need to be clearly defined
   - Development and utilization of local trainers is vital to sustainability of training efforts.

Conclusion

Implementing a major training initiative in a large rural state like Montana can be an enormous task. This is true even when the staff charged with starting the training have familiarity with the state and a large network of potential collaborators. The responsibilities for logistics in doing training in many parts of the state can be time consuming and expensive. Even when logistics can be managed, the problems of attracting an audience and developing a local structure to sustain the training efforts remain. Having a local network in place that is aware of local resources, has the needed connections to efficiently make arrangements, and can incorporate the specific initiative into a comprehensive training program is invaluable. The Montana CSPD has developed a regional system of training planning and implementation that provides local networks possessing these important attributes. When planning training that involves school personnel, the CSPD network is a valuable asset in implementing the training. For other rural states with similar challenges to statewide training, the Montana CSPD model is an option that should be considered to help training initiatives in the state be more comprehensive, efficient, and responsive to local needs.

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